

**A GUIDE TO
MAJOR RIVERS, STREAMS, AND TRAILS
IN SHIRLEY**



1. Upper Squannacook
2. Lower Squannacook
3. Mulpus Brook
4. Catacunemaug Brook
5. Spruce Swamp Brook / Valley Farm /
Holden Road Conservation Area
6. Nashua River -- Oxbow to Ice House Dam

The following profiles were written by members of the Shirley Greenway Committee. The Committee is an official board of the town, and is an advocate for the town's river and trail resources. Please contact the Committee at 425-9728, for questions or comments about the committee or the resources described. This series of profiles is supported in part by the Massachusetts Cultural Council, as administered by the Shirley Cultural Council.

The Committee is developing an additional series on other stream and trail resources.

Shirley Greenway Committee

Charles Faucher, Chairman

Ralph Perkins

Steve Shollenberger

February 1994

Shirley's Lower Squannacook: Stepping Back in Time

The lower Squannacook River runs from the falls at the West Groton Bridge (Route 225) to its confluence with the Nashua River (2.25 miles).

With the exception of the rapids below the West Groton dam, this section of the Squannacook River, which forms the boundary between Shirley and Groton, is mostly in its natural state. The Boston and Maine tracks on the Groton side and the associated utility lines are occasionally visible. Apart from this, there is no development along the river. The Squannacook twists and turns through a landscape of steep eskers, forested with a mix of hardwood and hemlock which give deep quiet and intense shade. There is an occasional fallen tree which must be negotiated and a particularly dense snag, possibly needing a portage, at about 3/4 mile; here can be seen an old fordway, which once carried travelers from one side of the river to the other when Shirley was still part of Groton. As the terrain flattens, marsh and backwater are more evident. At about one mile there is an abrupt change in the character of the river, as it widens dramatically into a large pond.

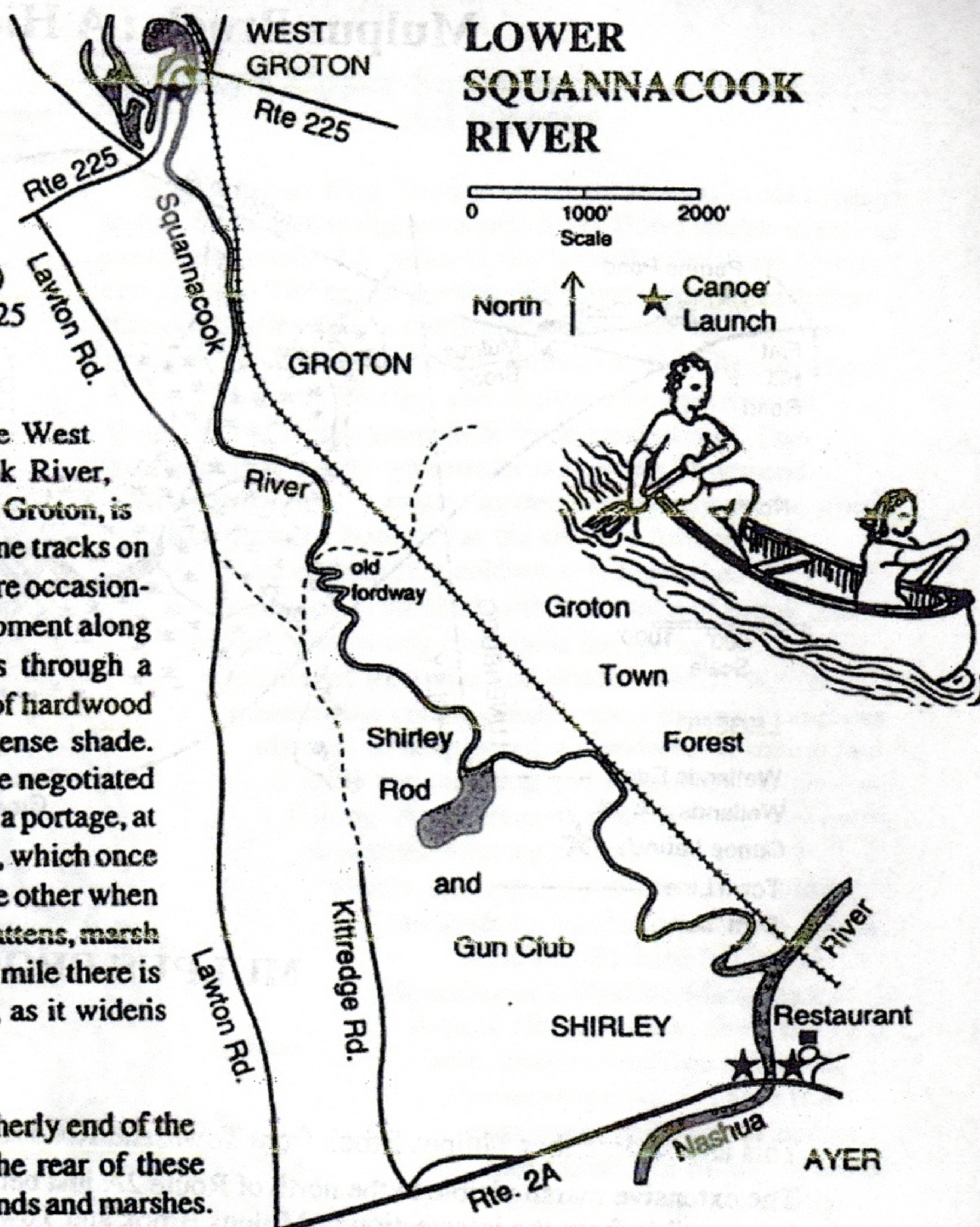
The channel of the river cuts across the northerly end of the pond. To the west rise steep eskers, and in the rear of these eskers is a series of large, interconnected wetlands and marshes. Much of this rich wildlife habitat is owned by the Shirley Rod and Gun Club. As the river exits this pond, it resumes its upstream character somewhat before it joins the north-flowing Nashua River, slightly downstream from the Route 2A bridge at the Shirley-Ayer line.

Wildlife

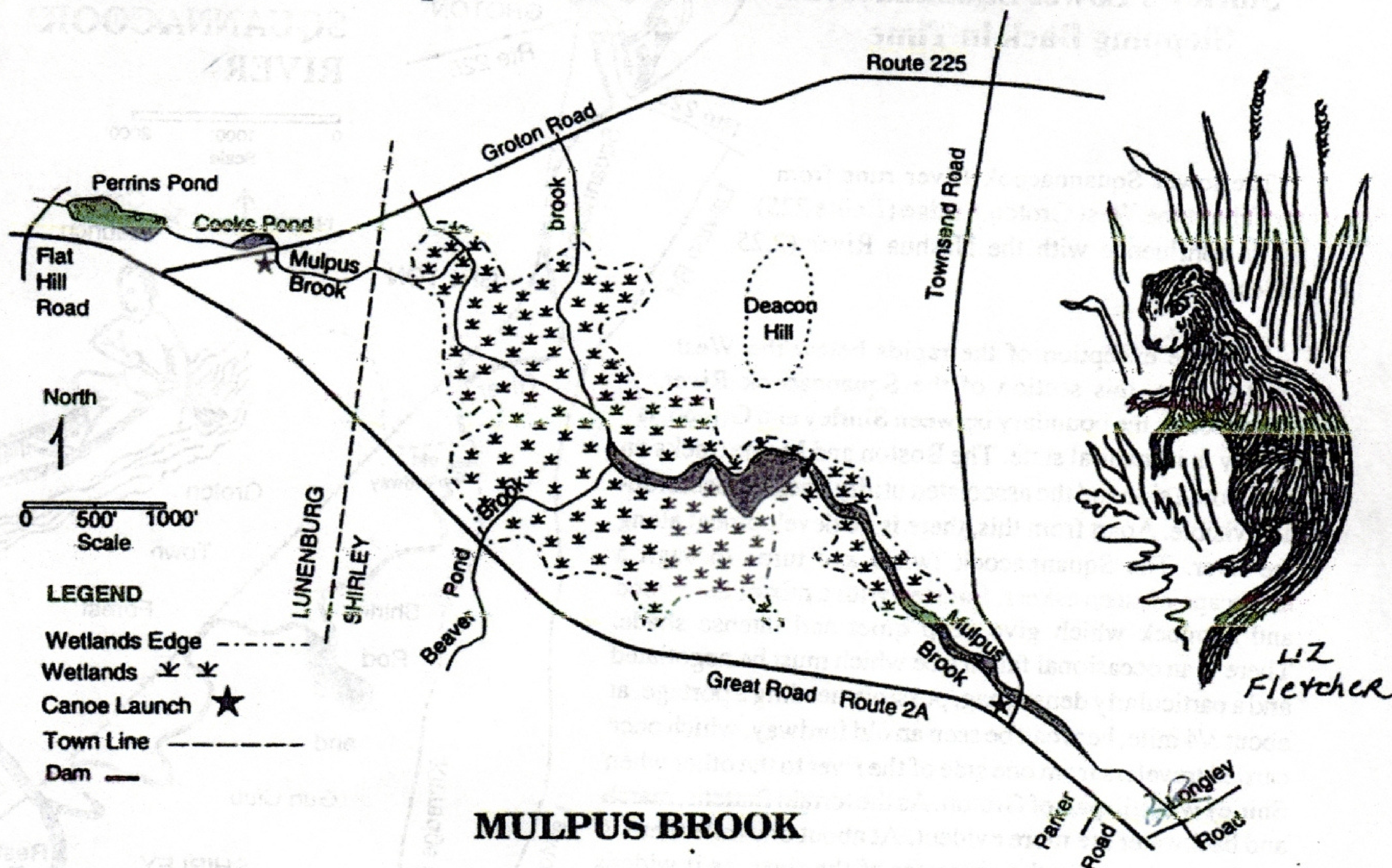
This part of the Squannacook is an excellent example of a riverine wildlife corridor. Although development is crowding in somewhat from the Shirley side, the river and its associated wetlands are relatively undisturbed. Beaver activity is evident at many points along the river, especially at the large pond on Shirley Rod and Gun land. Riverine and other mammals - fisher, otter, fox, porcupine, mink, deer - can be observed by the very patient. Great Blue Heron regularly can be seen in the great pond. The state Division of Fisheries and Wildlife stocks the Squannacook with trout, and it is heavily fished, especially in the spring months. The Groton Town Forest, Groton Conservation Trust, and Fisheries and Wildlife lands border the Squannacook on the Groton side, from the old fordway south to the confluence with the Nashua; they provide excellent habitat for upland wildlife.

Canoeing

The lower Squannacook is free flowing and can be challenging. The launch site for the river is down a traverse path on the steep embankment below the falls by the Route 225 bridge. Watch for flourishing poison ivy and loose footing. The river is easiest to canoe in spring or after a rain when water is high, but caution must be used in negotiating fallen trees during high water. Take out is upstream of the confluence with the Nashua River, either at the cul-de-sac beside Karen's Restaurant (Ayer side) or on the State right of way (Shirley side).



Mulpus Brook : A Hidden Treasure



MULPUS BROOK

This article describes Mulpus Brook from Townsend Road to the Shirley / Lunenburg town line.

The extensive marsh visible to the north of Route 2A just before the Lunenburg line (at the former Mohawk Club) is accessible from the intersection of Mulpus Brook and Townsend Road. This trip is best taken in spring and at other times of high water. There is an easy launch on the upstream side of the road. From there paddle the well-defined stream to a low dam and portage to your left. Once into the marsh, you may have difficulty spotting the main channel; look for scouring marks in the stream bed below. Deacon Hill rises to the north. Progress is easy until you reach the far end of the marsh. Here the waterway becomes less well defined as Beaver Pond Brook enters from the south. Unless the water is high and your craft is light, progress by water beyond this point is difficult.

For the more adventurous, it is possible at high water to put in where Mulpus Brook crosses under Route 225 at the Lunenburg line. The channel is well defined and passes between the high abutments of an old bridge and several glacial eskers. Expect some wading over rocks and some wrong turns as the Brook enters the marsh.

Wildlife

The Greenway Committee took this trip in the Spring of 1993 and was treated to the sight of a river otter foraging among the cattails; for us a rare and thrilling spectacle. The marsh teems with activity: kingfishers, barn and tree swallows, redwing blackbirds by the score, warblers, mallards and black ducks, several great blue heron, Canada geese, and plentiful signs of muskrat and beaver.

This area is almost completely natural, interrupted only by a stretch of building on Route 2A some distance off. Since the Mulpus is accessible to the public only by canoe, it is seldom visited. There is at present no officially conserved land either to the north or south of this section of the Mulpus. For the adventurous, this unspoiled treasure is well worth the extra effort needed to explore it.

Shirley's Historic Industrial Waterway: Catacunemaug Brook

Catacunemaug Brook begins at Lake Shirley in Lunenburg and runs southeasterly through Shirley Village as it travels to the Nashua.

Even though the brook is small, the impoundment of water at Lake Shirley provides year-round flow; the steep adjacent gradient has made it easy to dam. In its day, the brook provided power for two blacksmith shops, one saw mill, seven cotton mills, a paper mill, a fork manufacturer, a "forge" where scythes and other farming tools were made, and a nail-making shop. The proximity of the railroad also made it attractive for industry.

The Lake Shirley dam itself is not accessible to the public. The brook is most visible looking south from the bridge on the town line at the end of Catacunemaug Road. Opposite the road from Lake Shirley Beach Campground, a foot-path leads to the site of a rock crib dam and raceway. From this path, there is a very pretty view downstream. This millpond provided power for Salter's Mill which was off of Pond Road, now a private way. The mill took woven wool and reprocessed it into shoddy yarn; this may be the origin of the expression, meaning goods of inferior quality.

Where the railroad tracks intersect Catacunemaug Road there was, in the 19th century, a community known as Slab City, so-named because of the material used to construct the homes. Slabs are the rounded edgings taken off a log as it is squared. The name remains to this day, as the Boston & Maine Railroad's designation on a group of signals at that location.

The brook was again tapped for power at the George Frost Company just above Shirley Village, where Bow Brook joins the Catacunemaug. A large millpond was created by a rock crib dam, the remains of which are clearly visible as squared timbers and a massive throw of stones downstream from the site. The powerhouse and remains of the raceway, which ran through the powerhouse, are still visible. A large isolated wetland, well-screened by vegetation, remains. Great Blue Herons forage here - a truly unusual sight for an area as developed as this. Both the Salter's Mill and George Frost Company dams were destroyed in 1936 when the dam at Lake Shirley burst in a spring flood.

Continuing downstream from the broken dam at the old George Frost Company, the stream travels under Front Street and skirts Fredonian Park, site of an 18th century cotton mill and now a town-owned recreation and nature study area. Below Fredonian Park are the sites of two more former cotton mills followed closely by the existing Phoenix Pond impoundment. On the south side of the dam stands "Phoenix Mill," built and named by area Shakers in 1850. The building is crowned by a tower that still contains a fine-toned bell, and the mill's water wheel is still operable. By 1852, the mill employed 100 workers, more than half of them women. In recent years, the mill was operated by Samson Ocean Systems, manufacturers of rope. From this dam, the brook continues about one-half mile to its confluence with the Nashua River at Fort Devens. The tail race from the old Shaker mill parallels the brook for most of this distance.

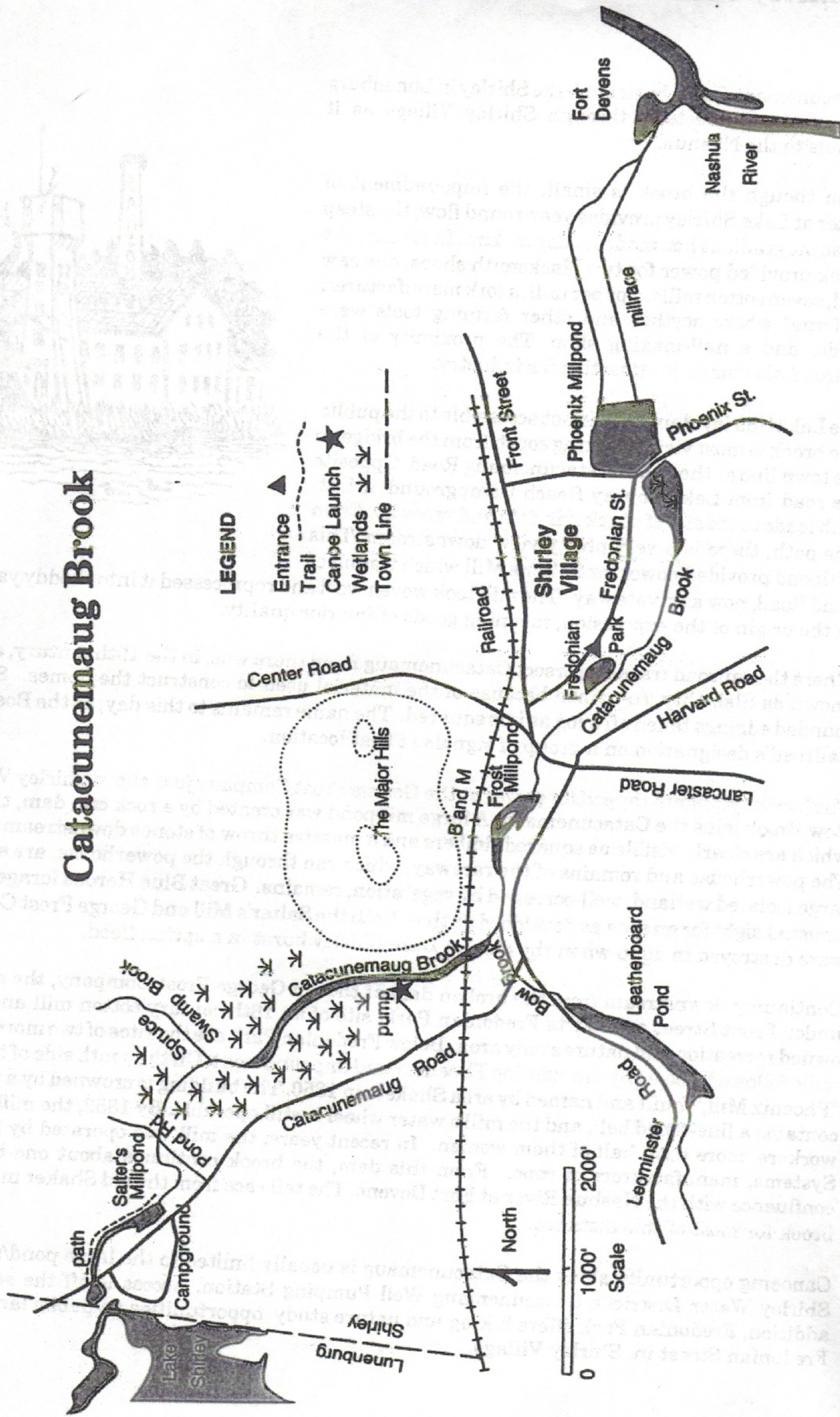
Canoeing opportunity along the Catacunemaug is usually limited to the large pond/marsh near the Shirley Water District's Catacunemaug Well Pumping Station. Access is off the service road. In addition, Fredonian Park offers hiking and nature study opportunities on public land. Access is off Fredonian Street in Shirley Village.



Catacunemaug Brook

LEGEND

- Entrance ▲
- Trail - - -
- Canoe Launch ★
- Wetlands ⚡
- Town Line - - -



Spruce Swamp Brook

Spruce Swamp Brook is a small seasonal stream originating in Shirley Center's Spruce Swamp. With its tributaries it forms a mini-watershed draining the western part of Shirley, south of Chapin Hill between Whitney and Holden Roads. It first passes under Center Road through a culvert just south of Meadowbend, an 18th century home, with a western view of the historic Longley homestead. The brook then crosses these fields just north of the forested land that is a part of the protected area owned by Arthur Banks, descending through a wooded gorge called Paradise to the wetlands below, passing through a former cranberry bog along Holden Road. A culvert under Holden Road then takes it to further wetlands alongside the town's Holden Road Conservation Land before entering Valley Farm. There it flows closely below the historic James Parker house, the heart of a 200 acre wildlife sanctuary preserved by Hermann and Kate Field. At the southern end of Valley Farm, Spruce Swamp Brook empties into Catacunemaug Brook.



There are two accesses to this area. The first is via a trail which begins where Spruce Swamp Brook crosses under Holden Road. Look for the sign on the south side of the road about .25 miles from Center Road. The trail borders the brook wetland for a while then turns upward to the west. The main trail leads ahead to Valley Farm. The Farm can be more easily accessed via a foot trail which begins on Center Road. Look for a logging road on your right beyond Holden Road as you drive south on Center Road, just before the red house. A chain prevents vehicle access. Here, Spruce Swamp Brook, its wetlands and forests, have been forever protected through a conservation easement. While the land remains private, the public can enjoy the natural beauty of Valley Farm on an extensive trail network.

The main north-south road through the forest was once the town road from the colonial Center community to a mill on the Catacunemaug. There is an especially fine view of the Catacunemaug and the hills beyond from a resting stone on the edge of the river at the trail's southern end.

The ravine trail follows an especially dramatic section of Spruce Swamp Brook, where hemlocks on a steep gradient shelter a swift running stream.

Autumn and winter are two special times of year at Valley Farm. Autumn displays its foliage brilliantly, and in winter, the trail system becomes a superb cross country skiing opportunity.

Since Valley Farm is private land, special care should be taken to observe the use rules posted at the entries to the farm. The Fields desire to preserve this habitat for the protection of its wildlife and the enjoyment of townspeople. Here in our midst is a fine opportunity to explore an unspoiled stream and forest.

Spruce Swamp Brook and Valley Farm

LEGEND

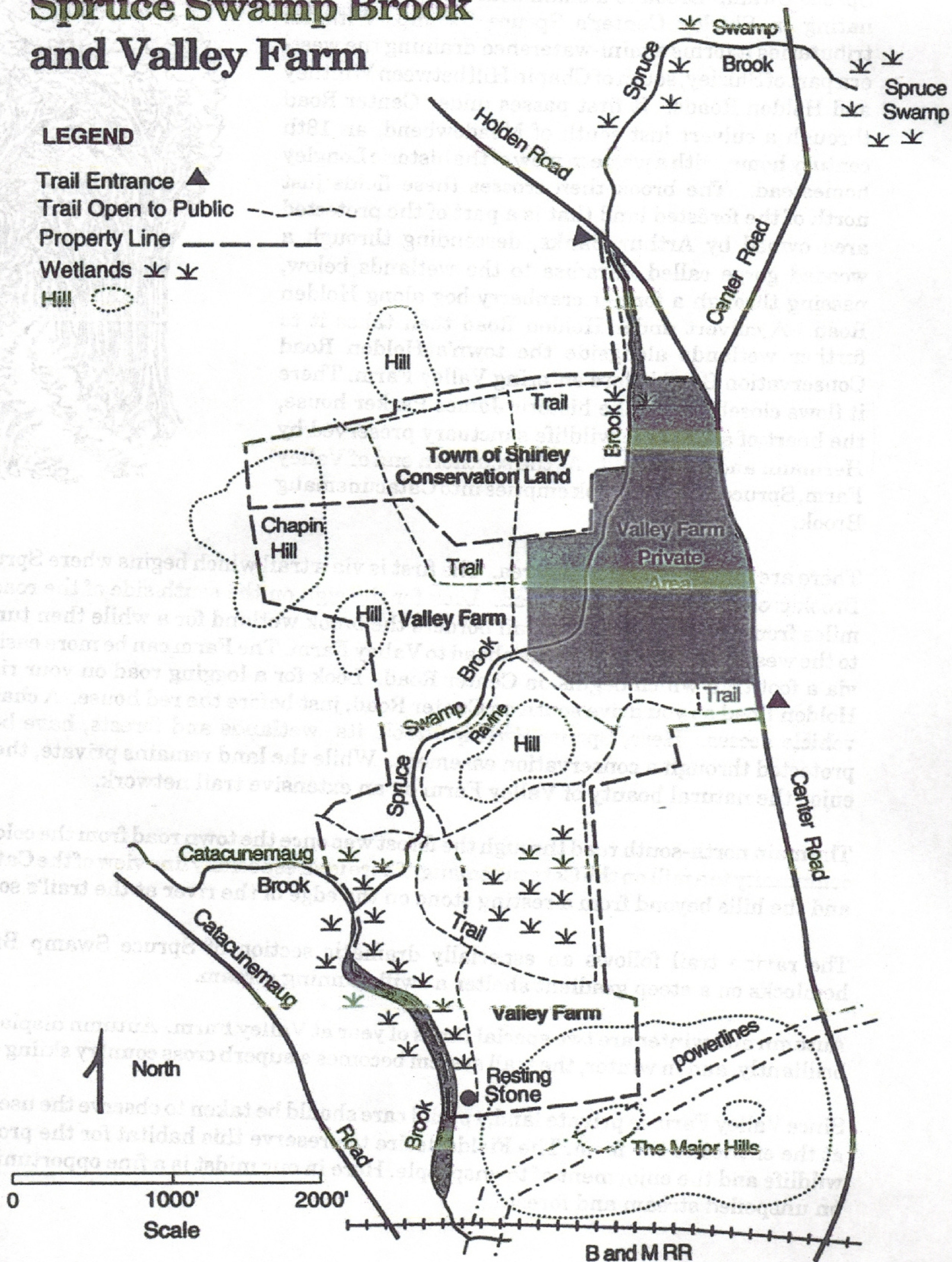
Trail Entrance ▲

Trail Open to Public - - - - -

Property Line - - - - -

Wetlands ↗ ↘

Hill ○



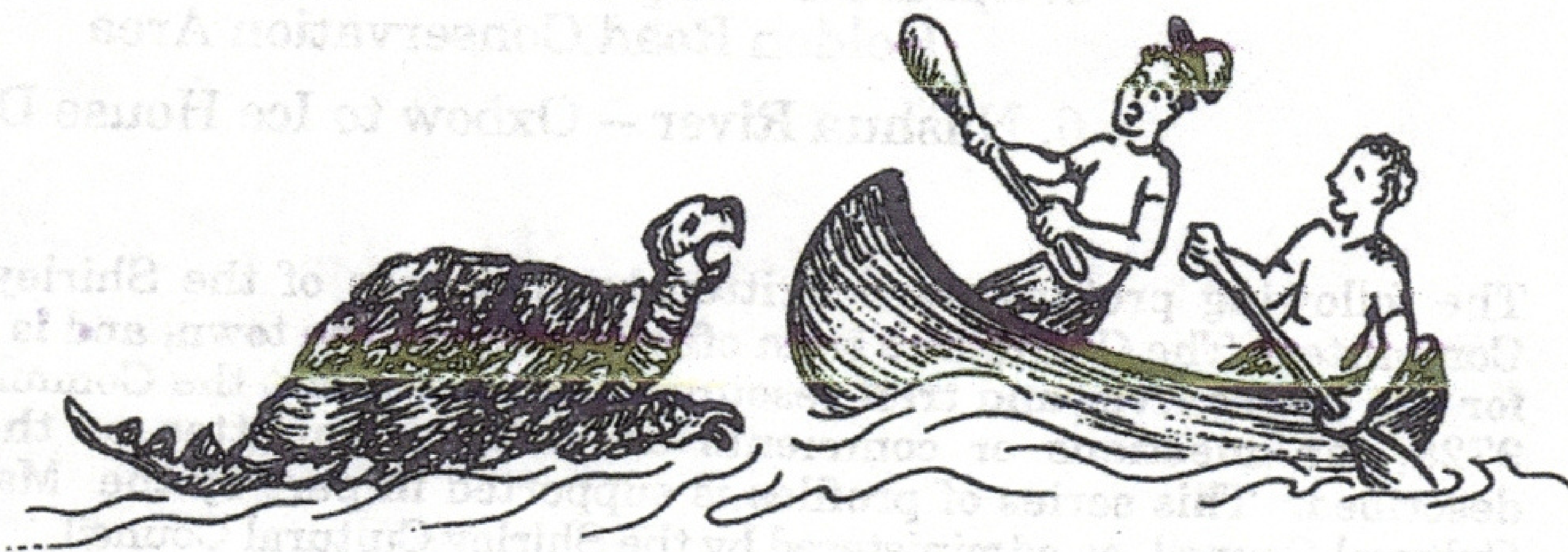
The Nashua River : From the Oxbow to the Ice House Dam

This section of the river is approximately 6 miles in length and will take 2 1/2 to 3 hours of paddling to complete. The canoeing is entirely flatwater, with a mild current propelling you along. The launch is at the Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge at the end of Still River Depot Road in Harvard, off Route 110. The takeout is at the Ice House Dam in Ayer or at the corresponding point on the Shirley side. The trip ideally would be broken by a stop for lunch or a leg stretch.

The character of the Oxbow, which is being considered for major expansion as Fort Devens closes, is open with little elevation change. From the air or a topographical map the history of the area is clear: the river has changed course many times and has cut across the neck of a loop or oxbow and created an isolated pond or wetland. There are literally dozens of these to the east and west of the present course of the river. A sense of this is gotten from the Route 2 bridge, looking south. These wetlands provide excellent wildlife habitat. North of the Route 2 bridge, there is a marked change in topography, especially on the Shirley side (west) of the river. River terraces with steep ravines present a forested wall to the paddler.

Just beyond the Route 2 bridge on the west bank, there are the remains of an abutment of an old Shaker bridge, which once connected the Shaker communities of Shirley and Harvard. This abutment is also the terminus of the MCI-Shirley Greenway Trail, accessible through MCI- Shirley only.

The ponding effect of the Ice House Dam is very evident though the dam is still 2 miles off. The river is wide and placid. There is the foundation of an old boat house on the right. Stone arches where the boats used to put in and a chimney remain. Just before the Hospital Road bridge, the Catacunemaug Brook flows in from the west. At high water, a short trip can be taken. Soon you will pass under the Mitchellville (Main Street) bridge, connecting Shirley to Ayer. Take out is either on the right just beyond a rock jetty, or at a corresponding point before the dam on the Shirley side.



Wildlife

Bring your field glasses and identification books, as this is a section of the Nashua particularly rich in plants and animals. Depending on the time of year, you might see: turtles -- painted, Blandings, and snapper; (In the summer of 93, the Committee saw a couple of truly gigantic snappers.) beaver; muskrat; Canada geese; wood ducks; herons; scarlet tanagers; rose-breasted grosbeaks; kingfishers; green frogs, bull frogs, deadly nightshade, cardinal flower, jewelweed.

An excellent expanded treatment of the natural resources of this section of the Nashua River can be found in the "Nashua River Greenway Guide" by Liz Fletcher. It is available from the Nashua River Watershed Association River Resource Center on Route 119 in Groton.